

**Chairman Rubio:** “Good afternoon, thank you all for being here. Appreciate your indulgence. We just came out of a vote so we’ll get a late start here. But I appreciate this Subcommittee meeting on the Western Hemisphere will come to order.

The hearing today is on the U.S.-Colombia relationship and it’s entitled: *New Opportunities to Reinforce and Strengthen Our Bilateral Relationship*. **So there's two things I wanted to achieve with today's hearing**, which we’ve been trying to get through some time now, and that we really want to do. **First, obviously talk about the U.S.-Colombia relationship.** And second, we review it by and large. **But second, and most importantly, our commitment, restate our commitment and what we can do to be helpful to Colombia and to the Colombian people. And at the outset I would say it's impossible to talk about Colombia today without talking about Venezuela and the destabilizing impact that that crisis is having.** Beginning, of course, with over 1.4 million Venezuelan migrants who are now living in Colombia the reportedly over a billion dollars a year the Colombian government is now spending in social services, in healthcare and the like. **And also the threat that’s posed, the direct threat to the Colombian state, to peace and security in Colombia by armed narco-terrorists elements operating with impunity just across the border with the open support and cooperation of the Maduro regime. And that poses a threat not just to Colombia, but ultimately to our security interests and to the region at large.** Today, that safe haven that the regime has provided is for two organizations that the State Department has designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations: the FARC, and its dissident elements that are now there [in Venezuela], and the ELN.

So this will be an opportunity to hear from our witnesses who will provide an update on the implementation of the so-called “Peace Accord,” on the new government now that’s been there for over close to a year, and the political dynamics, the direct U.S. interests that are threatened and impacted by what's happening there today, and then some ideas about how to strengthen our cooperation on all these issues. **Just some key facts that I want to leave here on the record, it is my view that Colombia is our strongest and most capable ally in the Western hemisphere on a series of fronts.**

**For me personally, obviously, there are many Colombians, Americans of Colombian descent, that reside in the United States, including a substantial portion of my family, since my wife is of Colombian descent.** But that's not why we are doing the hearing, but nonetheless we are. **And it's a very vibrant community, very engaged and involved.** Colombia, unfortunately, and I know this issue from having been around it, even predating my public service, has a very long history, a very long struggle to restore peace in the country. Plagued for decades, first by very powerful and murderous drug-cartels, by these Marxist and narco-terror insurgencies. **And this has been a bipartisan mission under both Republican and Democrat administrations to support Plan Colombia and Colombian-led initiatives to insure stability in the country.** It really began under the leadership of former Colombian President Uribe.

**And the important work continues to this day through the current administration. The support for the new Duque administration is paramount for our cooperation on shared diplomatic, security, counter narcotics, rule of law, human rights, and economic development.** And so the combination of the generous support of the American people, and the incredible work and sacrifices made by the Colombian people, Plan Colombia became a model for effective and targeted foreign assistance.

**After many years of negotiations with some of these FARC elements, former Colombian President Santos, President Duque's predecessor, concluded what I personally viewed as-but again it wasn't for us to make this decision-but what I viewed as a Peace Accord with significant flaws with the largest guerrilla organization in Colombia, the FARC, which is a terrorist organization.** It's well known for plotting against the Colombian government from their safe-haven in Venezuela. And they are frankly responsible for the deaths of Colombian police officers and innocent civilians in just the last year. In just the last year, they've conducted attacks they've claimed credit for.

**There's another narco-terror group, which I mentioned, the ELN. They have over 1,000 fighters inside of Venezuela. And now they've been joined by these dissidents of the FARC elements who are also operating in the same area right there in the border region.**

And so now thousands of ELN and FARC dissident fighters they are newly re-energized by recent defections from some who were cooperating with the Peace Accord and then defected. And, as I said earlier, by the open support of the Maduro regime. This presents a very serious security challenge to the region, to Colombia, and ultimately to our nation's interests as well. **Human Rights violations against civic leaders are also a concern. Both the Inter-American Commission of the OAS and the UN Office of The High Commissioner have reported and verified the killings of Human Rights Defenders and Social Leaders.**

**I believe President Duque has taken strong steps to ensure Colombia remains stable.** He's even gone to great lengths to preserve aspects of the Peace Agreement. Aspects, frankly, that were favorable to the FARC.

Unfortunately, these efforts were met with high-level defections and a return to narcoterrorism for many of the FARC's leaders and followers.

**So I believe we indeed are living in a critical moment, not just for Colombia but for the region.**

**So earlier this year, I wrote an op-ed that recommended some steps the United States could take to support Colombia under the Duque administration.**

Specifically, that our country should provide strong support and financial assistance to continue this fight against the illicit flows of cocaine through our borders. **And this**

**includes things like providing unmanned aircraft or drones that can spray cocoa crops; increasing intelligence support to operations targeting these illegally armed groups; ensuring additional equipment, funding and training for riverine units.**

So I hope that our witnesses today will explain the critical nature of these programs and of the challenges that they address, and reassure this subcommittee that assisting Colombia remains a top priority for this administration.

**I would like to close by recognizing the significant steps taken by the Duque administration, not only in welcoming, as I said, over 1.4 million migrants fleeing the man-made catastrophe created by the Maduro crime family, but also for being a strong partner to the U.S. in the fight against external forces that aim to destabilize our region.** With that, I now recognize my colleague, the Ranking Member, Senator Cardin.”